

As Congress lurches from self-imposed crisis to self-imposed crisis – most recently in the debacle regarding the fiscal cliff – it is easy to understand why members of the public shake their heads in disgust at the inability of the government to do the important work of America to help Americans.

Of course, for long-term economic stability and growth, we must have greater balance between revenue and expenditures. That means Congress should pay close attention day to day, month to month, to revenue and to spending and should bring them more into line. That should always be true, though, not just whenever someone invokes a crisis.

And say what you will, there was no good reason for a crisis at the end of 2012. The “cliff” deadline was artificial, the result of a deal agreed to in August 2011 when some Congressional members who dislike government tried to prevent the U.S. from paying our bills, and the White House and Congressional leaders allowed them to hold the government hostage and then to impose automatic spending cuts and tax increases in the most thoughtless, ham-handed way.

As I see it, the big problem with the fiscal package that Congress passed earlier this week is that it was debated and negotiated on the terms set by the hostage-takers in 2011. The negotiators came up with a solution, barely acceptable, but it was a solution to the wrong problem. Instead of talking about what our government needs to do put people to work; to reduce unemployment; to educate Americans; to rebuild our roads and bridges; to stimulate vibrant and innovative industry; to tend to the nourishment, the housing, the cultural well-being of all Americans – and then doing those things – Congress and Administration spent several months neglecting all the important work in front of us. Instead they focused on such things as whether the marginal tax rate should be 36 percent or 39.6 percent for income earned above \$250,000 or \$450,000. The sad irony is that meeting the needs of Americans and doing things to bring about growth would do more to remove the debt problem and to make the U.S. the kind of country we can be proud of than all the tinkering with marginal tax rates.

This deal was done wrong. The postponed crisis will reappear with the debt crisis and sequestration and tax increases in March, and the President will be in a weaker, not stronger, position to deal with the crisis then.

However, it seemed to me that if the deal failed to get the approval of Congress, we would not

get back to what we should be doing. Because I did not want to make the situation worse by weakening the President's hand and weakening the economy by allowing the government, so to speak, to fall off the cliff, I voted with great reluctance in favor of the McConnell-Biden deal, and Congress passed it earlier this week.

Nine Weeks of Inaction

It has now been about nine weeks since Hurricane Sandy brought winds and tidal surges. In Central New Jersey, in Connecticut, in New York, people are hurting. Towns have exhausted their emergency funds and exhausted their borrowing capacity.

In other disasters, such as the disaster associated with Katrina or with wildfires or with any number of other natural disasters, Congress has acted, and aid has been provided quickly. And yet earlier this week, the 112th Congress adjourned before passing a much-needed disaster relief package. The Senate had already acted to pass a well-constructed aid package bill. The only reason that this bill is not law today is that House leadership refused to act.

There is, at least, a light at the end of the tunnel. The Speaker allowed a small flood insurance bill to pass on Friday, to be supplemented by a larger aid package in the weeks ahead. Yet the supplemental bill must now go through the Senate, which won't bring it up until after January 21 – and the same radicals in the House who refused to allow the earlier Senate package to come to a vote may yet rebel against the new deal.

This delay has gone on too long already. To say “you’re on your own” to victims of a natural disaster breaks our trust, and it hurts people.

The Oath of Office

On Thursday morning, I was honored to take the oath of office as a member of the 113th Congress.

As is only too clear to anyone who has read this far in this message, the past few weeks – indeed, the past few years – have been a time of great challenges for America. So it is worth pausing to reflect on the oath that all members of Congress take at the beginning of a new Congress:

“I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.”

As Jim Leach, a former Republican Congressman and the current chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, noted in remarks at my oath-of-office ceremony, it is notable that American legislators affirm their loyalty to the *Constitution*, a set of principles, not a person, and they mean it. Of course, other nations have constitutions, but I don't know of any that is the touchstone that ours is.

Most of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives took the oath of office on Thursday. Although our differences are stark, I am hopeful that our shared loyalty to the Constitution and to what it represents will be a point of commonality that brings us together in these trying times.

Sincerely,

Rush Holt